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SUBJECT: MARRIAGE BROKERS OUT IN FRONT OF KOREAN LEGISLATION

REF: SEOUL 810

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) The trend for international marriages continues to rapidly increase in Korea as in other countries in the region. Marriage brokers have quickly adapted to the increased demand and have found ways to cash in on the lucrative business. Despite the plethora of legitimate broker companies, a number of unscrupulous businesses have also emerged and caught the attention of the National Assembly. Representative Kim Chun-jin of the Health and Welfare Committee proposed a bill to regulate marriage broker companies. The bill is likely to "weed out" many illegitimate businesses and help improve the image of respectable businesses in this growth industry that involves large amounts of revenue and little supervision. The National Assembly chose not to consider the proposed law when it was first drafted in June 2006 and has yet to take it up thus far in 2007. END SUMMARY.

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MARRIAGE IN A BOX  
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¶2. (SBU) As noted in reftel, Korean citizens, predominantly men, are increasingly considering international marriage as a relatively simple way to find a spouse and start a family. In the case of men who are impoverished, divorced, handicapped, or suffer from mental disorders, it is increasingly difficult to find women in Korea who are willing to marry. Many of these individuals rely on marriage brokers for assistance. As a result, there are currently 2,098 marriage brokers registered in Korea.

¶3. (U) Building on a practice that has a long history in Korea, marriage mediation continues today in various forms. Parents often work behind the scenes to ensure that their son or daughter marries an "appropriate" spouse who will allow the family name to remain strong, if not increase the standing of the family.

¶4. (SBU) The modern form of this practice is for a single man to contact a marriage broker who finds the man a foreign

spouse. Comprehensive services ranging from a personality assessment to plane tickets to Vietnam to the food at the wedding reception are provided by most of the larger broker companies. In addition to the larger companies, a number of marriage brokers are smaller "mom and pop" businesses that focus solely on international marriages because of the higher profit margins over domestic marriages. In 61 percent of companies listed as marriage brokers, the company president also acts as a matchmaker, indicating a relatively small operating staff. Many international brokers got their start as an employee at a trading company that had business dealings in the region; many of them are married to a foreign spouse.

15. (SBU) Clients are often asked to pay USD 10,000 or more for these comprehensive services. One NGO reported that fees range as high as USD 17,000. A report from the National Assembly showed that the average revenue for a broker is estimated at between 20 million and 60 million won per month (roughly USD 20,000 to USD 60,000). Many clients from the poorer rural areas cannot afford these steep prices so they enlist the help of families and friends to gather the requisite money. In other cases, municipal governments have subsidized the cost of international marriage in an attempt to help keep residents in the outlying districts, typically agricultural communities. Currently, 60 local governments have programs to financially support international marriage through a broker.

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CONCERNS ABOUT BROKERS  
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16. (SBU) The National Assembly's Health and Welfare Committee identified a number of concerns that prompted the proposed legislation to better manage marriage brokers. First, there are increased concerns about the possibility of trafficking in persons given the lack of transparency in the recruiting of potential spouses in the sending country. Additionally, false or exaggerated information about the potential Korean spouse has led many foreign brides to report that they were married under fraudulent circumstances. Second, as profits soar and competition among brokers heats up, there is increasing concern that the industry will foment illegal or nefarious activity. Third, there is little recourse for husbands in the event they are dissatisfied with the outcome of their broker transaction. Whether the issue relates to the fees that were paid or the promises that were made, on a very basic level, there is a concern for the protection of the consumer in a business transaction.

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PROPOSED LEGISLATION  
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17. (SBU) Representative Kim Chun-jin, a member of the Health and Welfare Committee in the National Assembly, told poloff he proposed a law that would impose some basic restrictions on companies that broker international marriages. Initially, regulation of brokers will come in the form of consumer protection laws focusing on the transaction between the broker and the client. The proposed Act on International Marriage Brokerage stipulates that before a broker can arrange a marriage, an explicit contract must be drafted between the broker and the client. This contract must specify the terms of the deal including all fees and services to be rendered. The contract must also specify the terms under which a refund may be granted, if at all. The new law will also specify the obligations of the broker and the accompanying penalties if those obligations are not met.

18. (SBU) One area that is still under consideration is whether or not to introduce a permission-based system of

marriage brokerage rather than the current registration-based model. Under the proposed system, an aspiring marriage broker would apply for a license from the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Currently, a marriage broker need only register with the local government, which does not conduct any investigations into the business owner or business practices.

The National Assembly chose not to consider the proposed law when it was first drafted in June 2006 and has yet to take it up thus far in 2007.

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COMPANY PROFILE: INTERWEDDING LTD.  
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¶9. (SBU) In a meeting with poloff, Lee Eun-tae, the founder and president of the largest marriage broker in Korea, shared his thoughts about the law and marriage brokers in Korea. Founded in 1998, Interweddning LTD. boasts 30 branches nationwide and 8 branches outside of the country. In 2006, Interweddning was responsible for arranging 15 percent of international marriages in Korea. Building on his background as a tour coordinator, Lee founded the company after several business acquaintances asked him for assistance in marrying a foreign spouse. From the outset, the majority of requests were for ethnic Korean Chinese or Russian spouses. After a few years, the trend shifted toward Southeast Asia and now the majority of Lee's business is done in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.

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THE ABC'S OF GETTING MARRIED  
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¶10. (SBU) First, the prospective client registers with Interweddning on the Internet and submits basic biographical information. An Interweddning consultant contacts the client

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to discuss the company's services and options. Next, the client visits an Interweddning office for a detailed consultation to ascertain the client's preferences and begin the search for a suitable foreign spouse. Although some clients have already determined the country of preference, other clients rely on Interweddning to make a recommendation based on the personality and situation of the client. Clients are asked to provide Interweddning with a copy of their birth certificate and Korean ID, but no financial documents, job information or police records. Lee said that the initial processing of a new client usually takes between one to two months before the arrangements are finalized to travel to the foreign country to select a spouse.

¶11. (SBU) Lee described his typical client as a Korean male who either owned a farm or a small family business. Most clients were between 35 and 40 years of age and 80 percent were not previously married. The typical spouse was a conservative female from the countryside who was not previously married. Complaints from foreign spouses typically come from Russian or Chinese brides who have difficulty adjusting to Korean culture or who are dissatisfied with the housewife lifestyle in Korea. The majority of complaints from husbands are because of brides' requests to send money back home to their families.

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COMMENT  
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¶12. (SBU) International marriage is not a new trend in Korea. Ethnic Korean Chinese have been the predominant source of foreign brides for Korean men for the past decade. These women, who typically speak Korean, have managed to integrate themselves somewhat into Korean society, especially as members of the labor force. As more Korean men marry brides from Southeast Asia, the ROKG faces new challenges integrating foreign women into the Korean culture. While the

Ministry of Gender Equality and Family works to address these concerns, the National Assembly continues to struggle with its challenge of how to regulate the marriage brokerage industry and protect the rights of both Korean and foreign citizens. In the meantime, there is a steady flow of customers lining up at Interwedding and other marriage brokers throughout Korea.

VERSHBOW